

Perceptions and Realities of Study Abroad at UWEC

Understanding and Improving Participation in Study Abroad Programs

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Introduction

The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire has a large learning abroad program designed to meet the diverse needs and interests of a wide variety of students. The more established and traditional (e.g., summer and semester-long, exchange, and language-based) study abroad programs are complemented by a dynamic and varied array of shorter (two to four week) faculty-led immersions around the world (Figure 1). Between 2012-2017, 1,974 students participated in at least one of over 45 different programs; about 25% of UWEC students participate in a learning abroad experience during their college career. Historically, UW-Eau Claire has been one of the top performers in the nation for sending students on programs abroad. However, since 2007 UWEC's national ranking in study abroad has fallen from top 10 to out of the top 20.

UW-Eau Claire would like to ensure that learning abroad programs are accessible to all students. Decreases in student participation over the years may be a question of affordability, integration with students' disciplinary interests, student perception of obstacles (cost, time, etc.), incomplete information, or an issue of preparation and planning. To better understand learning abroad participation, our research group evaluated five years of participation data in UWEC's formal study abroad programs and in UWEC's more recently developed international faculty-led programs. This included demographic data regarding who (males/females, soph./junior, major, etc.) has participated in which programs and when/where they were doing it. We then developed and administered a survey to introductory, general education geography classes in an attempt to understand student perceptions of abroad/faculty-led immersion programs. By comparing what students have done (past practice) with what they say they are going to do (best intentions), we hope to better understand obstacles to participation in UW-Eau Claire study and learning abroad opportunities.

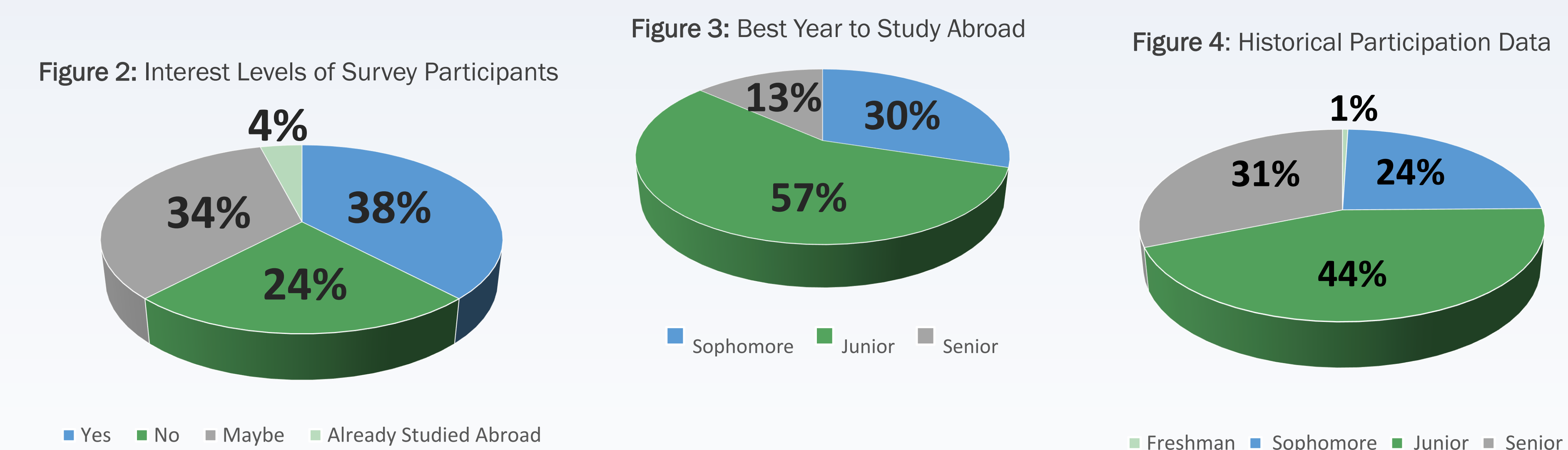
Methods

To start, we analyzed data about previous study abroad participation provided by the Center for International Education (CIE) and the Faculty-led International Immersion Experience (FLIIE) program. The data accounted for all students who participated in CIE and FLIIE programs from Fall 2012 through Spring 2017. We then created a survey with questions regarding students' interests, intentions, understanding, and perceptions. The survey was administered to numerous lower-level, general education geography classes (GEOG 104, 111, 135, 178, and 188). The intent was to identify student perspective at the front end of their studies at UWEC. Across the eight classes surveyed, 489 students completed surveys; 43% of respondents were first years. For demographic data, we asked questions ranging from students' gender, hometown, major, financial aid status, and current GPA to questions about whether or not they wanted/planned to learn abroad, why or why not, and how much they actually knew about their various options – length and timing of learning abroad programs, availability of financial aid, etc. Our intent was to identify the factors that influence student participation rates. (Interestingly, the survey itself served as an educational tool for informing students about learning abroad, providing them information, letting them know about financial aid, and encouraging them to think about learning abroad now). We created an Excel spreadsheet to organize, manage, and analyze our data.

Findings and Analysis

In response to "Are you interested in studying abroad?" – the central question of our survey, 72% of respondents indicated "Yes" or "Maybe", less than a quarter of students had ruled it out (Figure 2). This contrasts sharply with actual practice – only about 25% of UWEC students actually participate in our study abroad or immersion programs. Another discrepancy between intentions and actual practice is suggested by Figure 3. Almost 90% of first-year student survey respondents who affirmed interested in learning abroad (n=183) believe that the ideal time in their academic career for doing so is their sophomore (30%) or junior year (57%); one-eighth believe it would be during their senior year. However, actual participation data show that students study abroad later than they apparently intend. Data provided by CIE (Figure 4) show that 31% of students participate in study abroad as seniors and 44% as juniors. (Some students responded with a range of years).

Survey respondents came from all four of UWEC's Colleges. Students from the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Nursing, and Business who do not plan to study abroad ranged from 24% to 28%, namely, the university average. Noticeably, College of Education majors are significantly more likely to learn abroad – only 17% say they do not plan to.



According to our survey, most students interested in learning abroad (72, or 39%) identified participating in a full semester studying abroad as the most preferred length of time for learning abroad, though most respondents indicate a willingness to consider multiple timeframes. Compared to past participation, we found that students tend to participate in shorter programs offered during Summer session and Winterim. In 2016, 293 students engaged in a CIE study abroad program; 220 (75%) participated in a fall or spring semester abroad and 73 (25%) studied abroad short-term over summer or Winterim. Another 129 UWEC students participated in summer or Winterim faculty-led FLIIE immersion programs. Thus, in 2016, a total of 202 students (48%) participated in shorter, summer/Winterim programs and 220 went on semester long programs. This compares to nationwide data (Open Doors, 2017), which reports that 43% of all study abroad students participate in summer or January programs of eight weeks or less.

Both males and females who participated in our learning abroad survey have roughly the same interest in studying abroad (Figure 5). This would suggest that participation rates should reflect the gender balance of all students at UWEC, 61% female and 39% male. However, according to actual CIE and FLIIE data, females participate at disproportionately greater rates. Nearly four out of five students who participate in UWEC programs are female (Figure 5).

Goal of Research
To increase student access to and participation in learning abroad.

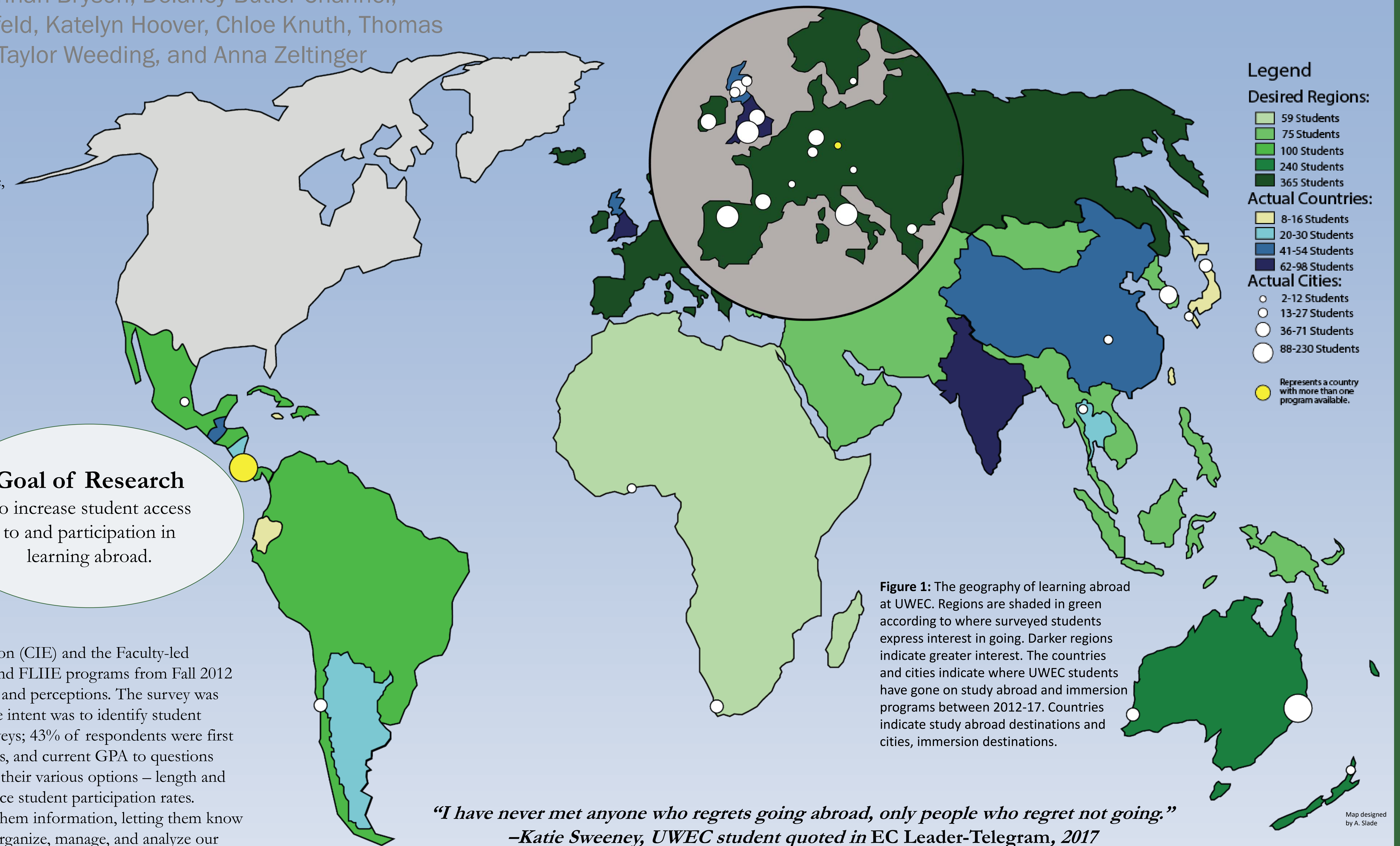


Figure 5: Comparison Between Past Study Abroad Gender Research and Survey Gender Research

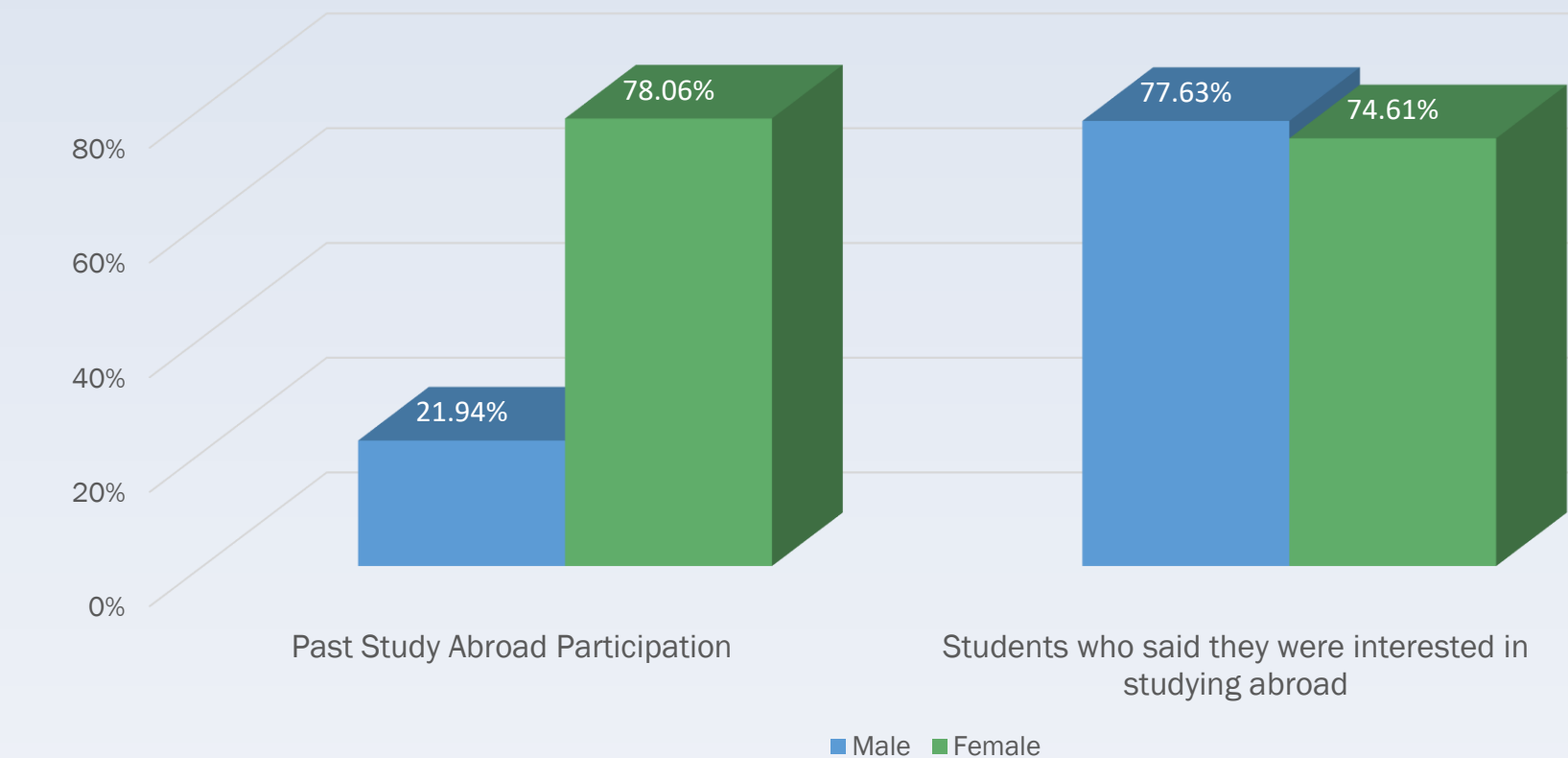
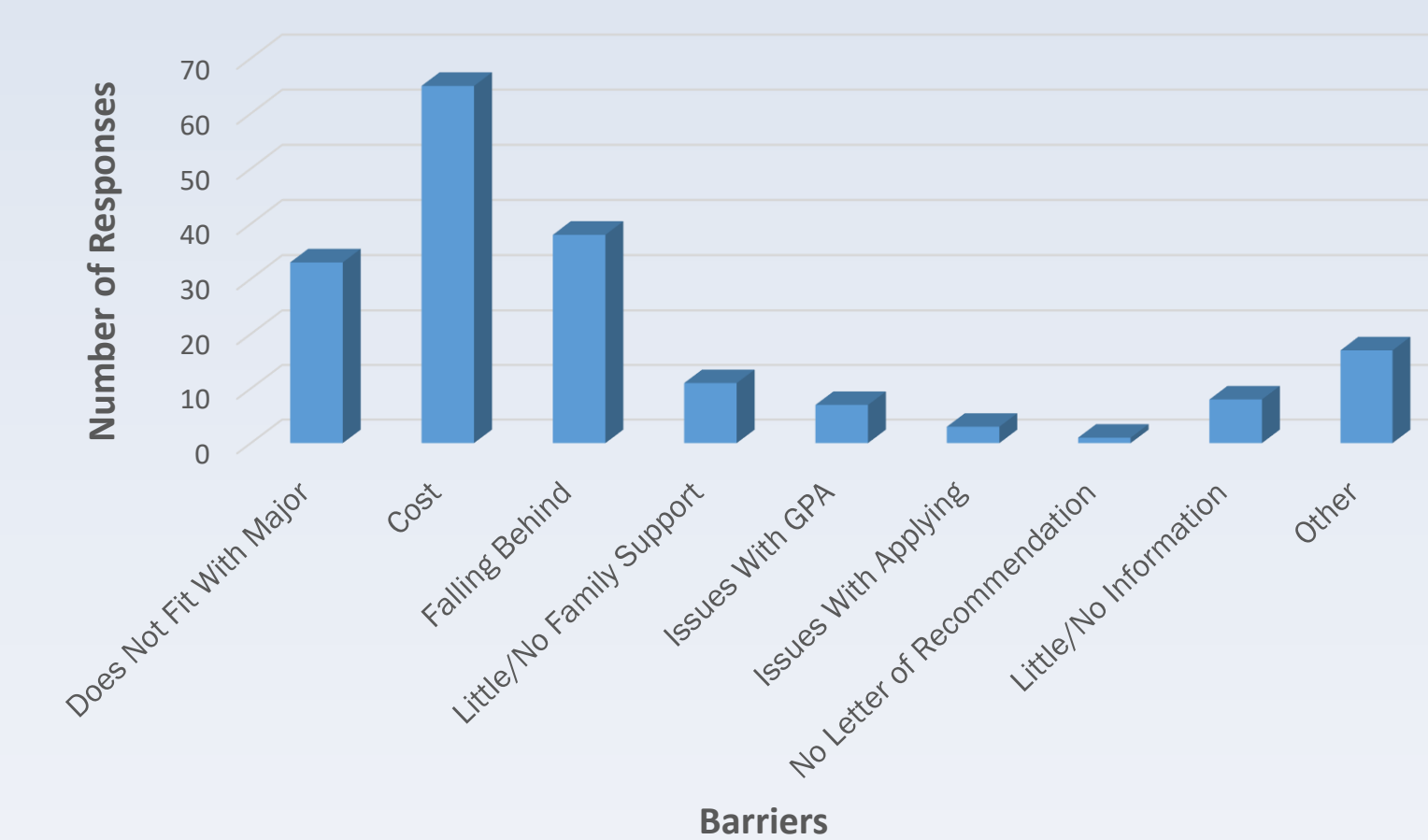


Figure 6: Perceived Barriers to Studying Abroad



The two most prevalent barriers to participating in study abroad, as cited by those surveyed, were cost and the potential of falling behind in their degree program (Figure 6). Of the students who indicated that they were not interested in studying abroad, 56% identified cost as a barrier while 33% identified falling behind (i.e., lost time toward graduation) as a barrier. Among the "Maybe" respondents, 61% identified cost as a barrier and 36% responded that falling behind was a barrier. Thus, perceived cost is the main concern expressed by potential participants. Still, most respondents identified multiple barriers to participating in studying abroad.

Of the total respondents, 41% obtained information on study abroad from family and friends, and nearly 50% of those who identified cost as a barrier acknowledged that they did not know about scholarships and that financial aid can apply to study abroad. Reliance on informal information from family and friends instead of from UWEC indicates the possibility of misinformation. This suggests the need to focus on ways to promote/advertise scholarships for study abroad and to pay closer attention to information sent by the university.

Conclusion

Our data suggests that, overall, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire follows nationwide trends in study abroad. However, the interests and intentions of students shown in the survey results vary noticeably from actual participation statistics. The inconsistencies between intentions and practice are evident in the timing, duration, costs, and gender make-up of learning. High participation rates in summer and Winterim programs suggest a desire for new opportunities for students. Overall, our study finds that as a university and as a nation, perceived barriers to learning abroad reflect a lack of accurate and timely information, and departments and programs would be well served to work within their disciplines to identify opportunities befitting of their students. While many students study abroad, we hope to see increased participation in study abroad and faculty led immersions.

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